

JEREMIAH

Introduction

The prophet Jeremiah

Few personalities from the Old Testament are better known and close to us than the prophet Jeremiah, born at Anatot, a town of the tribe of Benjamin, in the middle of the VII century B.C.

First of all, because we know quite well that part of history when he lived, thanks to the biblical documents, together with extra biblical writings of that time (see 2K 22–25). And also because a great part of the book of Jeremiah is autobiographical, written perhaps by his disciple and secretary Baruc.

We can follow the tragic and touching itinerary of Jeremiah: his vocation in the year 627, the first prophetic activity addressing the destroyed Northern Kingdom, the youthful dreams. After a time of silence (622–609), the great tragedy of Josiah and the terrible revelation of the “Northern threat”. From there the scorn of the people because the threats do not come thru, the retrenchment and isolation of a bitter prophet, the insults and, finally, the open persecution. His vocation becomes unbearable and he needs the consolation of God. Finally all his threatening oracles begin to take place.

The prophet tries to gather a group of Jews so that sacred history would continue in Palestine; he is taken by force to Egypt where he pronounces his last oracles. He ends as an anti-Moses, that is, doing backwards the road of liberation, loosing the institutions and the Promised Land, returning to Egypt, where the name of the Lord is no longer invoked. The prophet runs this path in a passionate way. He feels torn between solidarity with his people and the word of God, between obedience to the divine mission and solidarity with his suffering people. His life and passion seem in many aspects an anticipation of the one like Christ.

The book of Jeremiah

Regarding the materials, usually three groups are distinguishable: the first one formed by the original oracles of the prophet and his confessions. The second comprises the biographical narrations, where there are also oracles of the prophet. The third is formed by Jeremiah's discourses.

It was necessary, often times, to reestablish the order or point out the interruptions in the presentation, to make the text more legible.

Jeremiah stands out for his capacity to create images. He stands also by his lyricism and for his intense emotions.

1 ¹These are the words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. ²The word of Yahweh came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon, king of Judah. ³It came again during the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah, king of Judah. In the fifth month of that year, the inhabitants of Jerusalem were taken into exile.

Vocation and first oracle

⁴A word of Yahweh came to me:

⁵—Even before I formed you in the womb I have known you; even before you were born I had set you apart, and appointed you a prophet to the nations!

⁶I said:

—Ah, Lord Yahweh! I do not know how to speak; I am still young!

⁷But Yahweh replied:

—Do not say; ‘I am still young’, for now you will go whatever be the mission I am entrusting to you, and you will speak of whatever I command you to say. ⁸Do not be afraid of them, for I will be with you to protect you—it is Yahweh who speaks!

⁹Then Yahweh stretched out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me:

—Now I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰See! Today I give you authority over nations and over kingdoms

to uproot and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.

¹¹A word of Yahweh came to me again:

—Jeremiah what do you see?

I said:

—I see the branch of a watching tree.

¹²And Yahweh said to me:

—You are right. I too am watching to fulfill my word. ¹³The word of Yahweh came to me a second time:

—What do you see?

I replied:

—I see a boiling caldron coming from the north and it is tilted towards this direction.

Then Yahweh said to me:

¹⁴—From the north disaster will boil down on all the people of this land. ¹⁵I am calling all the kingdoms of the north—it is Yahweh who speaks.

Each of them will come and encamp
at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem;
against all its surrounding walls
and against all the cities of Judah.

¹⁶I will pass judgment on my people
because of the evil they do in forsaking me;
they have burned incense to foreign gods
and worshipped gods their hands have made.

¹⁷But you, get ready for action;
stand up and say to them all
that I command you.

Be not scared of them
or I will scare you in their presence!

¹⁸See, I will make you a fortified city,
a pillar of iron with walls of bronze,
against all the nations,
against the kings and princes of Judah,
against the priests and the people of the land.

¹⁹They will fight against you

but shall not overcome you,
for I am with you to rescue you
—it is Yahweh who speaks.

Sermon on the temple

7 ¹These words were spoken by Yahweh, to Jeremiah:
—²Stand at the gate of Yahweh's house and proclaim this in a loud voice: Listen to what Yahweh says, all you people of Judah (who enter these gates to worship Yahweh). ³Yahweh the God of Israel says this:

Amend your ways
and your deeds
and I will stay with you in this place.

⁴Rely not on empty words
such as: 'Look, the Temple of Yahweh!
The Temple of Yahweh!
This is the Temple of Yahweh!'

⁵It is far better for you
to amend your ways
and act justly with all.

⁶Do not abuse the stranger,
orphan or widow
or shed innocent blood in this place
or follow false gods to your own ruin.

⁷Then I will stay with you
in this place,
in the land I gave to your ancestors
in times past and forever.

⁸But you trust in deceptive
and useless words.

⁹You steal, kill,
take the wife of your neighbor;
you swear falsely,
worship Baal
and follow foreign gods who are not yours.

¹⁰Then, after doing
all these horrible things,
you come and stand before me
in this temple that bears my Name
and say, 'Now we are safe.'

¹¹Is this house on which rests my Name
a den of thieves? I have seen this myself
—it is Yahweh who speaks.

At the potter's house

18 ¹This is the word of Yahweh that came to Jeremiah:

²—Go down to the potter's house and there you will hear what I have to say.

³So I went to the potter's house and found him working at the wheel.

⁴But the pot he was working on was spoiled in his hands, so he reworked it all over again into another pot that suits his desire.

⁵Meanwhile Yahweh sent me his word:

⁶—People of Israel, can I not do with you what this potter does? As clay in the potter's hand so are you in my hands.

⁷At times I warn a nation or a kingdom that I will uproot or destroy it. ⁸But if they change their ways, I then relent and refrain from doing the harm I had intended to do.

⁹At other times I declare that a nation or kingdom will be built up and planted ¹⁰but then they do what displeases me and do not listen to me, so I decide to reverse the good deeds that I intend to do.

¹¹And Yahweh added:

—Now tell the people of Judah and to those who live in Jerusalem:

Yahweh says to you,

'Listen, I am planning to destroy you;

I am hatching a devastating plot against you!

Turn from your evil ways;

rectify your conduct and your deeds.'

The broken jar

19 ¹This was an order of Yahweh to Jeremiah:

—Go and buy a jar from the potter. Take with you some elders of the people and a few senior priests, ²and go out to the valley of Ben-Hinnom at the entrance to the Potsherd Gate. Proclaim there what I tell you.

¹⁰Then, you shall break the jar before the people who have accompanied you ¹¹and you will tell them that I, Yahweh the God of hosts, will smash the people of this city like the shattered jar of the potter which is beyond repair.

¹⁴Then Jeremiah left Topheth where Yahweh had sent him to prophesy, and stood in the porch of the House of Yahweh. There he told all the people:

¹⁵—Listen to the word of Yahweh, God of Israel: I am about to bring on this city and the towns surrounding the disaster that I have already foretold, because they are a stiff-necked people and will not listen to me.

Jeremiah's confessions

20 ⁷Yahweh, you have seduced me
and I let myself be seduced.
You have taken me by force and prevailed.
I have become a laughingstock all day long;
they all make fun of me,
⁸for every time I speak
I have to shout, "Violence! Devastation!"
Yahweh's word has brought me
insult and derision all day long.

⁹So I decided to forget about him
and speak no more in his name.
But his word in my heart becomes like a fire
burning deep within my bones.
I try so hard to hold it in,
but I cannot do it.
¹⁰I hear many people whispering,
‘Terror is all around!
Denounce him! Yes, denounce him!’
All my friends watch me to see if I will slip:
‘Perhaps he can be deceived,’ they say;
‘then we can get the better of him
and have our revenge.’
¹¹But Yahweh, a mighty warrior, is with me.
My persecutors will stumble and not prevail;
that failure will be their shame
and their disgrace will never be forgotten.
¹²Yahweh, God of hosts, you test the just
and probe the heart and mind.
Let me see your revenge on them,
for to you I have entrusted my cause.
¹³Sing to Yahweh! Praise Yahweh and say:
he has rescued the poor
from the clutches of the wicked!

JEREMIAH’S BIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS

Jeremiah, judged and released

26 ¹At the beginning of the reign of Judah’s king Jehoiakim son of Josiah, the word of Yahweh came to Jeremiah: ²Yahweh says this:

—Stand in the courtyard of Yahweh’s House and say to all who come from the towns of Judah to worship in Yahweh’s house—all that I command you to say; do not omit anything! ³Perhaps they will listen to you. Perhaps each one will turn from his wicked ways. Then I will change my mind and forget the destruction that I have planned to inflict on them because of their wicked deeds.

⁴Tell them: This is what Yahweh says:

—You have not obeyed me and you have failed to walk according to my Law which I have set before you. ⁵You have not heeded my servants, the prophets, whom I have persistently sent to you. If you stubbornly close your ears to them, ⁶I will treat this House of mine as I treated the sanctuary of Shiloh and let all the nations see that Jerusalem is a cursed city.

⁷The priests, the prophets and all the people heard what Jeremiah said in Yahweh’s House. ⁸When Jeremiah finished saying all that Yahweh had commanded, he was besieged by the priests and prophets saying:

—You are bound to die! ⁹How dare you speak in Yahweh’s Name telling us that this House will be treated like Shiloh and this city is to become a deserted ruin.

And all the people gathered around Jeremiah in the House of Yahweh.

¹⁰Upon hearing this, the leaders of Judah came up from the king's palace to the House of Yahweh and took their place at the entrance of the New Gate. ¹¹Then the priests and the prophets said to the leaders of the people:

—This man must die for he has spoken against the city as you have heard with your own ears!

¹²Jeremiah replied:

—I have been sent by Yahweh to prophesy against this House and this city all that you have heard. ¹³Hence, reform your ways and your deeds and obey Yahweh your God that he may change his mind and not bring upon you the destruction he had intended.

¹⁴As for me I am in your hands; do with me whatever you consider just and right. ¹⁵But know that I am innocent and if you take my life you commit a crime that is a curse on yourselves, on the city and the people. In truth it was Yahweh who sent me to say all that I said in your hearing.

¹⁶Then the leaders, backed by the people, said to the priests and the prophets:

—This man does not deserve death; he spoke to us in the Name of Yahweh.

²⁴As for Jeremiah he was befriended by Ahikam, son of Shaphan, and was not handed over to those who wanted him put to death.

Restoration oracle

30 ¹This is another word that came to Jeremiah from Yahweh:

²Yahweh, God of Israel says:

—Write in a book all that I have communicated to you, ³for the days are coming when I shall bring my captive people Israel and Judah back to the land I gave to their ancestors as their inheritance.